

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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The Parable of the Banquet | Matthew 22:1- 4, Luke 14:15-24**

Sixty million calories...I'm probably at eighty million and counting! We eat all the time, but there are some times that are special. There are meals that are memorable—some that you can never forget, and some that you want to forget. How many of you have ever had a bad night out? Let me put it this way, the food was fine, but the meal itself was awkward to disastrous. Anybody ever have one of those? I am not alone. I did not have to look far for this illustration. It jumped into my mind. We had been here no more than two years, I remember because the kids were babies. It was still a big deal to get babysitters, and some people that we were just getting to know invited us for a meal. They said, "We're going to go out. There's a fundraiser. It's fun, it's casual, you'll love it. Come on over to our house." Naturally, Laura asked, "What am I supposed to wear?" I said, "Well, they said fun, they said casual, but we're going out so I'm going to wear a blazer." And she put on... at that time there were these Laura Ashley frocks that were just so bright and so springy...And so we get to their house and the wife, who Laura hadn't even met yet, opens the door and she is in one of these little slinky black dresses that looked really nice, so I say, "Hey, that's great." And then the guy walks around the corner and he's wearing a black suit and he's all duded up. I say, "Oh..." And they couldn't be more gracious. They say, "Oh, we're so glad you're here! This is wonderful! Come on in. Our other guests are just about here, and then we're ready to go." Then the other guests come in and she's wearing a floor length black gown and he's wearing a tuxedo. And I cannot turn around, because if I turn around I will receive that look which turns into the movie "Dead Man Walking." And...we still talk about that meal.

Ever have a really bad night out? Jesus did. It's the only thing Jesus and I have in common. In the story that Luke tells about Jesus, there are more meals than in all the other gospel stories combined. He loved the imagery of food and he often combined these great feasts with a story, so the story of the prodigal son ends with a great feast, and the Passover meal marks the highlight of Jesus' last week. Luke marks the resurrection of Jesus with the road to Emmaus, and at the meal the downcast disciples look up and they recognize Jesus. It's at a meal. But sometimes the meal goes bad and you can learn as much from that as from the other. This is Luke, chapter 14:

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. ² There in front of him was a man suffering from

abnormal swelling of his body. ³ Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” ⁴ But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way. ⁵ Then he asked them, “If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?” ⁶ And they had nothing to say.

[Luke 14:1-6]

One of my professors was a Jewish scholar and he said, “This is what is a problem for rabbinical scholars with this story; there is never a time when a crowd of Jews had nothing to say.” But it’s an awkward silence. Nobody knows what to say. And in the silence it says,

⁷ When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸ “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹ For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

[Luke 14:7-11]

I can just see, as Jesus is telling this story, everybody around the table wondering *am I in the right spot here? Is He talking to me?* And the host is next to Jesus saying *You get ‘em Jesus*. It’s embarrassing when people do that, isn’t it? And just to make certain that the host suffers it says,

¹² Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” [Luke 14:12-14]

By now the meal has gone quiet. Everybody is offended except, it appears, for one person who thinks they get it...*oh, you’re talking about heaven*.

¹⁵ When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” ¹⁶ Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the

time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' ¹⁸ "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' ¹⁹ "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' ²⁰ "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' ²¹ "The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' ²² " "Sir," the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' ²³ "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"
[Luke 14:15-24]

What are you hungry for? Well, if you're here there is at least a small part of you that is hungry for a spot at this table. Why would anybody miss it?

Last week we talked about how Jesus is the manna, the bread of life, and today we are talking about the invitation to the table where you get the bread of life. How could they stand to miss it? How come the meal was awkward? How could we miss that special meal? Well, as I looked at this story, it seemed to me not that they were opposed to eating with Jesus or to the banquet of heaven, it's just that they preferred a banquet where everybody knew their place. We want to go where we know our place. That's not often, frankly, the head table, is it? I have a friend who is the head of World Vision. He said he was invited to a special meal and he sat down and the president of the United States sat down, and then the secretary general of the United Nations sat down, and then over there Bill Gates sat down and seated next to him was Warren Buffet, and he turned around and Bono sat down. And he thought *I know they're going to ask me to leave because I know I'm at the wrong table*. And the next thing he thought was *Wow!* And the next thing he thought was *You know, I bet this is what the feast of King Nebuchadnezzar looked like—all the rich and powerful, and that didn't turn out too well. Remember this, Rich*. Where is your place? When somebody invites you to your next wedding, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more distinguished may have been invited. And then the host who invited both of you will come and say, "Give this person your seat." Are you missing your place because you don't know your place?

Laura and I have had the privilege for over twenty years of taking people to Willow Creek, to this global leadership summit. Hundreds of thousands of people. We have hosted it here the last couple of years, but for years we would take fifty or seventy-five people down to Chicago where Bill Hybels and his staff have this great leadership conference. One year we went there, and we got there just a smidge late and so we had to sit up in the balcony. We were finding our places, and just across from us we see a

bunch of folks from Bethel Seminary. We greet each other and Leland—who is the dean of the school at the time—says, “Hey, did you know that Governor Pawlenty is here?” “No.” He said, “Have you met him?” “No, never met him.” “Well, come on, let me introduce you.” And we walked—not down to the front, but up the steps—to the back row of this huge auditorium, and then all the way down to the end of the row, and there is Governor Pawlenty and his wife, Judge Mary Pawlenty. We said hello and shook hands, and...Laura and I have been friends with the Hybels...we knew him before he was Bill Hybels. And so I wrote Bill a note and I said, *I’m sure you know this, but the new governor of Minnesota, Tim Pawlenty, is here. I’m sure you will want to make him feel welcome.* The next day, Bill sends a note back to Laura and me saying *Hey, why don’t you invite Governor Pawlenty and his wife to come to lunch in my office, and we will get to know each other?* So, I walk back up the stairs...he’s in the same place...top row, back, tucked away in the corner, and I said, “Governor, we don’t know each other well yet, but the Hybels just wondered if you would join them for lunch with us?” And the governor turned a little white, a little pale. He said, “Really? Well, uhm, I’ll check with Mary, but sure. We’d love to come.” And so the four of us walked over there for lunch. I was walking with Judge Mary and she was laughing. She said, “Tim is so nervous! When we make him wash the dishes, he listens to Bill Hybels sermon tapes.” We get to the door and I said, “Bill, this is governor Pawlenty. Governor Pawlenty, this is Bill Hybels.” The governor said, “It’s such an honor to meet you. I have learned so much from your ministry. This is just a real privilege for me.” And Bill says, “Wait, wait! Who’s the governor here?” And then he looks at me and he says, “That’s what I’m talking about.” Now, this isn’t political at all, but governor Pawlenty, tucked up in the back row of the balcony, followed a governor, Jesse, who made sure that every time he came in, everybody knew that he was there. And I kept thinking of this...do you know your place? I told this story last night and a woman came up after and said, “You know, I feel like I don’t struggle with this. I don’t need to be the center of attention. I’m just glad to be here!” And I said, “I wonder if the message for you is, does the person next to you know that you’re glad that they are here?”

We prefer a banquet where we know our place. I think Jesus then says there are a lot of people who don’t come to the banquet because we prefer a banquet that’s on our time. That’s sort of the core of this, isn’t it? “I’d like to come but I can’t come then...can I come later?” “Come now. Everything is ready.” But they all began to make excuses. I had a spiritual director once who said, “John, I think that the most important word for you in your battle with the evil one is not *no*. It’s not saying no to God. Your most important word is *later*.” What are you saying “later” to? *I’ll give more when we have more. I’ll study more when I have time. We’ll invite people later, when we don’t have such a crummy little place. I’ll stop when I’m not so busy.* Later means that it is hard to say Lord and later. And Jesus is saying that when you don’t respond to the invitation, either because you rush by it or because it’s not convenient, coming on our own time

really means coming on our own terms. The invitation to this table is not just to come, it's to declare your allegiance, regardless of what time it is.

My wife Laura does a great blog...couple times a week. Last week she talked about an experience she's been having. Laura has been preaching at local churches in the area; small Presbyterian churches that need help. And at one of them, here's what she said,

“Looks pretty bleak, huh? Might have been sixty-five people in the whole congregation. The guy doing the slides forgot, and then he kept clicking forward, trying to find the right place. I've been there before and there is usually a young man with some challenges who burps very loudly when I preach. They had cobbled together my lapel microphone so that it fell apart right towards the end of my sermon...good practice for my ninja-like reflexes. Afterwards I was expecting out of town guests for brunch at home. It's about a half hour drive, so I was anxious to bolt out the door at the end of the service. And afterwards, this is what I wrote in my journal: Jesus, you were there today in worship. And after worship, you came up to me and you awkwardly requested a conference. You looked like a crazy old man—kind of like one of those mad scientists with wispy white hair, growing in places hair is not supposed to grow. I had talked to you before, and in my mind I had labeled you as a little bit off. And when I didn't recognize you because I had to get home to prepare for guests, I said *I'm so sorry. I have to go.* That's Minnesotan for: I have more important commitments with people who are not crazy. And then you handed me an offering envelope and asked if I could send you my sermon transcript. And after my guests were gone, I thought, what if it had been a famous person who had stopped me? Would I have rushed off, or would I have somehow made time? What if it had been Jesus? Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me. Oh Lord, have mercy.”

Luke is telling this story because the followers of Jesus may suffer the same fate as the Jews in this story. They're too busy to join the party on God's terms. They weren't even called Christians then, they were called “People of the Way”, and they have come by the thousands to the party so the tone is cautionary for people who feel in control. Are you coming on His terms at His time, or do you still want to have a faith *and* a life? You can't have both. You can't have control of your faith and control of your life. This is a declaration of allegiance. I love this line; I can't even remember where I read it. This line says, “Pride is the great cloud which blocks out the sun of God's generosity.” God wants to shine the sun, but if we are too proud to stop, the sun don't shine.

We prefer a banquet where we know our place. We prefer a banquet on our own schedule, and I think that Jesus tells the story because we almost all prefer a banquet with our own kind. Jesus is saying *who is missing?* It's so important that Jesus says it twice. In verse 13 He says when you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind—those are buzzwords in Judaism for the outcast—and you'll be

blessed. Even though they can't repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. And then later in the story, He talks about the master. And the master says, "Go out into the streets and the alleys and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. None of these others will even get a taste of the meal." They won't taste the meal because their idea of a banquet is eating with their own kind. Who is missing from the feast?

Sometimes you don't even know...I'm working on this sermon on Wednesday...I'm at home working in the morning and I got to those places where the sermon was so boring to me that I knew it would be boring to you, so I knew I had to stop. And I had in mind that there is a rabbi in town that I have, for months, been thinking *I ought to reach out to this guy, I ought to reach out to this guy*. And so I just got in the car and drove up to the synagogue and thought *I'll just see if he's there*. So I went in the side door, the door was open, but the next door was locked, of course. But there was one of those buttons, so I pushed the button and the receptionist said, "Can I help you?" And I said, "Yes, I wondered if the rabbi is in or if one of his assistants might be here?" She said, "Who is this?" "Well, I'm a Presbyterian pastor from down in Edina." Silence. And the door stays locked. And somebody walks by, and the door stays locked. Then, "I'll see if the rabbi is here." Silence. I'm looking at the walls. A couple of minutes later the rabbi comes down and lets me in. We walk down towards the sanctuary and he's giving me that look that you give to people who buzz on your front door. That look that says *what do you really want?* And I said, "Rabbi, I just felt like I needed to reach out. I'd love to get to know you. I'd love to learn more about your community, and I'd like to have some of our people get to know some of your people. Wouldn't that be a good idea?" And slowly he warmed up and he said, "Well, maybe some time we could get together." I said, "Great!" and I took off. On the way home it struck me...I forgot the reason that I went! When I got back home I sent him an email and said, "Rabbi, delighted to meet you. I hope that we can make a lunch work sometime. Look, the reason that I came is that I wanted to say to you that my people want to stand with your people." The reason they wouldn't let me in the door...look, it's different. The doors are open here because there's nobody trying to scribble stuff on our walls, there's nobody trying to splash stuff on our altars, there's nobody threatening us. They live with this every day. I wanted to say to him *we are with you. If there's a way that we can help, let us help. If there's a way we can get to know you, let us know you. We want to stand with you.*

We have over 150 folks who have said they would love to help a refugee family feel like this country is their home. One hundred-fifty plus of you have volunteered to tutor or to adopt legal immigrants as they come into the country so that they can feel that there is a place at the table for them. Not so that we will convert them, not so even that we will teach them, but more that we will invite them into our lives—that's what Jesus is talking about here. Otherwise the table looks like it's just us. And sometimes this is dramatic, but I will tell you that a lot of times I think it's much more subtle. I was reading a book

the other day and thinking, I think it is a lot harder than we realize to be a single mom in this congregation, or to be a single person at all. Do we make them feel like they are part of the table, or do they have to hang back? I listened to Matt's sermon—Matt teaches at the Table on Sunday nights—this last week. He told a story about the rich and the poor, and he used one of my favorite authors. His name is Gustavo Gutiérrez; he's a liberation theologian. And Matt had this great quote from Gutiérrez: "So you say you love the poor? Name them." Not give them money, not hold rallies, but get to know them. Love the poor? Name them. I love that. But I have to say, I think in an age where we are so *let's do this...let's do that*, there is almost a new Pharisee among us. The new Pharisees are the ones who say *I want to get to know those people*. The new Pharisee's temptation is reach out to the other as long as the other is or looks different, and frankly to be pretty self-righteous about people who look like us, but have different politics, or have different sexuality, or a different economic background. We have become experts at saying *welcome to this table...don't get too close*. The problem in our society is as much to do with not having relationships with our own, so that we can have relationships with people who are not our own. It's a big table. God wants you at the table this morning. If you're not here, it's like a child missing. Like you have lost a tooth and you are always feeling for it. That's how much God misses you. So God wants you to come and know that your place is near Him. He wants you to come, not on your time, on His time. And His time is right now. And God says instead of looking for your own kind, why don't you reach out to the needy around you and invite them in too? Then the feast will be complete and God's joy will fill up, like when you see your kid walk through the door. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank you for this table where the feast has been set. I pray that we will know our place. I pray that we will come at the right time, and I pray that we won't just be here with our own kind, but that You would invite us and we will invite others, and there will be joy and laughter, healing, and a sense of being loved. Give us that life. Remind us that on the very worst night of Your life, You ate with the people that You loved and even the people that didn't love You, and You took the bread and You broke it and You blessed it and said, "This is my body, for you." You poured wine into the cup and said, "This is my blood, the cup of your salvation." So that when we eat this bread and drink from this cup, we remember Your feast. We proclaim Your death until You come again. Feed us the bread of life. Help us to share it with others. In the name of Your son, our savior. Amen

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.